

---

---

## MEDIA, ARTS, AND CULTURE REVIEW

---

---

Marjane Satrapi, ***The Complete Persepolis***. USA: Pantheon, 2007, pp. 352, \$24.95.

Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, Co-directors, ***Persepolis*** [animated DVD - French with English subtitles]. France: Sony Pictures Classics, 2008, 96 min., PG-13, \$26.49.

Reviewed by **June M. Madeley**,  
University of New Brunswick, Saint John<sup>1</sup>

The publication in English of *The Complete Persepolis* in one volume coincided with the 2007 theatrical release by Sony Pictures Classics of an award winning animated film based on the graphic memoir which Marjane Satrapi co-directed (official website: <http://www.sonypictures.com/classics/persepolis/>). The graphic novel was originally published in French in 2000. In both formats this material sheds light on a number of contemporary issues related to revolutionary and socio-political movement, religion and gender.

This sequential art memoir is produced in stark black and white and so is the animated film version. The film contains a few sections with colour that serve to highlight tensions and to demark periods of time within the story. The animation often puts one in mind of ancient shadow plays while the static images in the graphic novel are evocative of woodcuts in their stark simplicity. The story is told from Marji's point of view as she progresses through a number of life stages, beginning with age ten as the 1979 Iranian Revolution is unfolding and following through to her high school years spent in a French school in Austria and finally her college years back in Iran before leaving once and for all to live in France. Her child's eye view of communists, Marx and the government of the day is both amusing and edifying as we come to see how those who had struggled for change found themselves the target of repression by the new religious authority that came to power once the Shah was removed.

Persepolis is the Greek name for an ancient city (6th Century B.C.E) in Iran, it was once the capital of the Persian empire. At the time of the revolution that deposed the Shah and

---

<sup>1</sup> June M. Madeley is an assistant professor in the Information & Communication Studies Program, Social Science Dept. at University of New Brunswick, Saint John, New Brunswick. E-mail: [jmadeley@unbsj.ca](mailto:jmadeley@unbsj.ca)

ushered in a new era of repression for the Iranian people, Satrapi was ten years old. The title reflects her desire to show that there is more to Iran than a fundamentalist monoculture of religious fanatics. This revelation is especially valuable to Anglophone readers from the west. Episodes in the work highlight how skewed the picture of Iran is from outside of the country. Not that Satrapi is an apologist for the repression that followed the revolution (nor that of the Shah's regime which preceded it), but she shows that life does keep going when war and repression are the backdrop for adolescence and other life stages. People break rules; they resist authority and rebel in a number of ways. She also shows that some segments of society have an easier time resisting than others. Her own middle-class friends are often able to pay fines to buy their way out of infractions passed by the Guardians of the Revolution, while she and her female friends have their activities severely curtailed in comparison to their male counterparts.

In this way the work highlights the continued significance of what are sometimes called identity politics within social and political movement. In particular there is feminist analysis lurking under the surface of this graphic memoir. The Shah is presented as a tyrant who is overthrown by the people's revolution, but the people are made up of different classes and different genders. In the political void that follows the ousting of the Shah, religious fundamentalists move in and install themselves as another brand of tyranny. Despite calls of freedom during the revolution, the people are not free; they are most particularly not free to be critical of the new government, its authority and rules. *Persepolis* offers a highly accessible story that highlights the perils and challenges that follow revolutionary change with parallels to struggles in the Soviet Union, South Africa, Cuba or Nicaragua to name just a few examples. This story might be a useful illustration or a point of departure for analysis and discussion for courses of study that touch on Marxist political theory and socialist political struggle.

The graphic novel is in some ways a descendent of other significant, and critically acclaimed, memoirs presented as sequential art – Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), Nakazawa Keiji's *Barefoot Gen* (2004), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2007) also utilize this format, which can make difficult subjects more accessible to readers. These authors, like Satrapi, were aiming to make their stories accessible, possibly universal, so readers could identify with the broader themes. In addition, each of these sequential art memoirs include tragic and challenging events – a father's suicide, struggles with sexual orientation, persecution by nazis, the bombing of Hiroshima, and war and repression which may be more easily communicated in sequential art or animated film form than via some other media. Scott McCloud (1993) has argued that sequential art renders recognizable characters onto which we can easily place ourselves due to their abstract and cartoony styling. Comics and graphic novels have begun to break into mainstream culture and beyond the stereotype of "kid lit," in large part because of the variety of memoirs that have

been published to great public popularity and critical acclaim. These are not children's fantasies; they are serious treatments of serious issues, accessible to all ages. They are stories that need to be read and told and shared, they deal with issues that require attention, research and theorizing if we are to overcome political, ethnic and gender oppression.

*Persepolis* in either DVD or graphic novel form might be very useful in classrooms where political repression is being considered as a topic. It illustrates experiences of gender oppression as well as political repression and experiences of revolutionary political struggle. Parallels can be drawn between the Iranian revolution and its aftermath, which serves as the backdrop of this story, and many other revolutionary moments in political history.

## **REFERENCES**

- Bechdel, Alison. 2007. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- McCloud, Scott. 1993. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Keiji , Nakazawa. 2004. *Barefoot Gen (Volume 1)*. San Francisco: Last Gasp of San Francisco.
- Spiegelman, Art. 1986. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale - I My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon.